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OPINION

More leaked against or leaked for?

By Stephen Hess

Langhorne A. Motley, the new assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs, told a congressional committee last week that departmental efforts to consult with the lawmakers on Central American policy have been disrupted by "premature unauthorized partial disclosure" of plans.

"Do you mean leaks?" one member asked.

"Yes," Mr. Motley replied. (New York Times).

AFTER information comes through the formal channels — press release, speech text, public document, news conference, briefing, interview, and observation of an event — reporters gather additional information through informal means that have come to be lumped together as leaks.

The leak deserves a better fate than to share a common definition with rumor, gossip, and other backchannel exchanges between sources and reporters. As defined by Motley, a leak is a "premature unauthorized partial disclosure," as distinguished from a "premature authorized partial disclosure," which is a plant. Or, depending on one's vantage point, a plant is a beneficial leak.

The leak is rarely a tool of the press offices, whose domain is the formal channels of information. Nor is leaking often practiced in the lower civil service; the bureaucrats' world faces inward.

Viewed from inside government, a typology of why leakers leak would include:

The ego leak: giving information primarily to satisfy a sense of self-importance; in effect, "I am important because I can give you information that is important."

The goodwill leak: a play for a future favor. The primary purpose is to accumulate credit with a reporter, which the leaker hopes can be spent at a later date.

The policy leak: a straightforward pitch for or against a proposal using some document or insiders' information as the lure to get more attention than might be otherwise justified.

The animus leak: used to settle grudges. Information is disclosed to embarrass another person.

The trial-balloon leak: revealing a proposal that is under consideration in order to assess its assets and liabilities.

The whistle-blower leak: unlike the others, usually employed by career personnel. Going to the press may be the last resort of frustrated civil servants.

A more realistic security classification system, including some penalty for personnel who overclassify documents, would automatically cut down on the number of secrets that get reported in the news media. Government, I would contend, is quite good at keeping its real secrets.

But from the point of view of the White House, leaks consistently throw off a president's timing and frame issues in a perspective that is not of his choosing.

"How do you cope with leaks?" President Reagan was asked by U.S. News & World Report at the end of 1981. "I've been told that you don't," he replied. "Everybody who has been around here for a while tells me it is just the nature of the place." Nearly two years later, on Nov. 23, 1983, the headline across the front page of the Washington Post read, "Reagan Ordered Sweeping FBI Probe of Staff for Source of Leak." So to stop leaks, presidents resort to wiretaps and lie detectors. They always fail. In a system of such breathtaking diversity, they always will. Nor is it clear that, on balance, it is in a president's best interest to stop leaks. Is a president more leaked against or leaked for? Most experienced Washington reporters would contend that the answer is obvious. Indeed, about the investigation reported on Nov. 23, A Post headline concluded on Dec. 13, "Justice Probe Fails to Disclose Source of Leak." In the article beneath the headline, reporter Lou Cannon quoted one White House official as saying, "There is no evidence that reporters were told anything we didn't want them to know."

Adapted from Stephen Hess's latest book, "The Government/Press Connection," published this month by the Brookings Institution.